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Religions
Christian life

THE CHRISTIAN CHARISMA

By DR. ARNOLD B. COME

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The Christian Charisma

W. H. AUDEN has said, "Our dominant experience today is of God's absence, of his distance." And many critics of our culture maintain that Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, is the image of the human heart of our time. Man finds himself whiling away his time in nothing but absurd and trivial actions. Yet he does not commit suicide. He waits, for what he knows not, but he waits for someone to come or for something to happen, something that will explain what it's all about.

That this is true of the generality of men cannot be denied, although most of them do not think about it consciously or put it in these words. There are many voices that are urging that the same thing is true of the church. The church, they say, is a spiritual vacuum. In America it is just one more activist organization. It is just an expression of culture, a slave to the psychological needs and sociological desires of society. In other countries it is just a shell of outworn traditions and customs that no longer have meaning or power. Most Christians are Biblically illiterate and spiritually impoverished. There is no real worship, or prayer, or deep feeling, or fervent commitment. While the gears of the ecclesiastical machinery grind smoothly on, the mass of Christians sit dumbly in the pews week after week, waiting, without much zeal or expectation, yet waiting for something to happen, waiting for the return of the Spirit.

Those who have the solution

There are others who accept this whole critique of the church but who are not waiting. They believe that they have the solution, the way to "bring" the spiritual life back to reality. They do not all agree with each other but each is most zealous for his way. There are the revivalists of whom Billy Graham is best known. Then, there are the spiritual movements such as Buchman's Oxford Groupers (now Moral ReArmament) and the Camps Farthest Out. Now we have the various cell groups, which are a resuscitation of the Methodist class meeting,

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with prayer and Bible study. We also have a boom right now in so-called supra-parochial or para-parochial groups. These take the form of retreats for spiritual renewal or of centers for the study of the relation of Christian faith to the problems of the world. Finally, there are the exotic solutions for the church's lack of spirituality: faith healing and speaking in tongues. And this is not just a matter of Oral Roberts and the Pentecostals. Faith healing and tongues are having a large appeal in the sedate Episcopal Church and they are also cropping up here and there among us Presbyterians and Lutherans.

All of these attempts to "bring" the Spirit back into the life of the church suffer from one basic mistake. They all assume that Christian spirituality always takes the same form and shape and always is sustained by the same means and methods. They see spirituality as a withdrawal from the social to the individual and the inward life. They encourage the practice of other-worldliness, and a negative ethic. Their method is the creation of an *ecclesiola in ecclesiam*, or the formation of new small groups of the pious and the pure, cut off from church history and corporate responsibilities, from the rich traditions and the sustaining sacraments. When these forms are found "empty" and these methods ineffective, it is then assumed that God has withdrawn his Spirit, that we have failed God, that we are in a season of spiritual desert. Such a view violates the basic Christian faith that in Jesus Christ, God has come to men and called into being a discipleship. And he has promised that he *will not* leave them desolate. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Christ does *not* forsake his church. He *will* not let it go. We are bound to him by his Word and his Spirit, we are his and no longer our own, whether we like it or not. This is precisely the nature of the *new* covenant.

So there are no periods of spiritual emptiness. When old forms are empty and old methods ineffective, we are not to wring our hands and moan, "How long, O Lord, how long?" But we are to ask: where and how is the Lord with us and working now?

To help us to see where and how Christ's Spirit is present with us today, we must ask what are the essential and unchanging characteristics of the Christian charisma. What does it mean to receive a spiritual gift from Christ? What is Christian spirituality, what is that trans-human resource that alone empowers the Christian community to

fulfill its calling and mission in the world? There are, I believe, six basic points that must be made to bring some clarity on this much-confused dimension of the Christian life. And as a basis for these points I suggest that the reader refresh his memory of that crucial biblical passage, I Corinthians 12.

Now from this statement of the Apostle and from other of his writings I think the following becomes clear.

Meaning of a spiritual gift

1. Spirituality and spiritual gifts are not a possession but a being possessed. The primary meaning of "charisma" is simply "gift." Paul uses "spiritualities" and "charismata" as synonyms because what is given to men by Jesus Christ are not some rights and powers that are their own to be used on their own initiative to their own ends. What is given is the privilege to "live by the Spirit" and to "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). In other words, to find the center and meaning of existence in being possessed by God. And this fact makes it clear that "spirituality" does not consist of certain personality traits that are *mine*, nor of certain moralistic behavior patterns that can be easily identified or found lacking.

What is spirituality?

2. Since Christian spirituality is not a possession but consists of being possessed, it inevitably and always means being in relationship. What makes certain men distinct from other men so that they are called "Christian" is nothing that is unquestionably unique in themselves or their actions. What binds all Christians together and what sets them off as a peculiar race of men is that they submit their lives to the command of the same God, in service to the same Lord, by the power of the same Spirit. Christian faith and Christian life are not our doing. They are the work of God. They are the charisma, the gift, of God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. And the gift is not one that is given once because *what* God gives fundamentally is not some*thing* but himself, and this means a continuous giving, the gracious maintenance of a relationship with men. The Christian faith and life must be a continuous listening to God's Word in Jesus Christ and a continuous openness to his Spirit.

3. Perhaps the most important and most difficult point to make about this relationship is that the Spirit by whom we are possessed is not a some-*thing* but a some-*one*. The Spirit that gives us gifts is not something less than God. The Spirit, not just the Father and the Son, is God himself in a particular mode of his being and action and relationship. And God is never impersonal. And it is precisely as Spirit that he is most profoundly personal in his relationship with us: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God . . . When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:14f.). It is just in this relationship with God that the potentiality of man-as-person achieves its definitive expression and fulfillment, in response to and communion with God-as-Person.

> **Here we enter the realm of the profoundest mystery of the universe, a mystery beside which the mysteries of gravity and electro-magnetism, of genetics and light, pale into insignificance. Here is the mystery of personality that 3,000 years of philosophy and a century of psychology have been trying to penetrate. How are we to understand that an animal of the earth develops not only the ability to form abstract concepts and a language, but also to develop sensitivities to right and wrong, the beautiful and the repulsive, the true and the false? and then go on to speak of freedom and responsibility, hope and immortality, of the conscious and subconscious? And among men there is the ultimate mystery that these unique, discreet, complex individuals claim and constantly explore the possibility of a knowing and a union of each with the other in something called love. Then, finally, in the Christian faith we face the ineffable mystery of the communion of infinite sovereign, creator Person and finite, dependent, creaturely person. Here we must speak in paradoxes: of the union of the two orders of Creator and creature, of the meeting of the finite and infinite, the marriage of time and eternity, the establishment of man's freedom in his submission to the rule of God. But these paradoxes are resolved no where else but in the realities of forgiveness and renewal that are the first and basic form of our knowledge of God as Holy Spirit.**

It is abundantly clear, therefore, that the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gift of the spiritual life has nothing whatsoever to do with man's depersonalization by his absorption into the divine. Nor, on the other hand, does it mean man's deification by his being transformed into a perfect sovereign free agent. So in speaking of spiritual gifts we must avoid the language of "infusion" and "energizing" and even "mystical union" when these terms are used to imply some deeper and profounder relation than the interpersonal relation of love and faith that God establishes with us by his gracious condescension to us in Jesus Christ. We must of course admit that depths and ways of God's communion with us in love are beyond our powers of analysis, and of course beyond our control and manipulation. That is precisely why all the methods of the revivalists, of the so-called "spiritual disciplines," of group dynamics, and of the healers and ecstatics are a potential danger and illusion. The Spirit is not at the beck and call of any method, because the Spirit is God in his sovereign creative freedom. Rather, we listen eagerly to his Word wherever and whenever he speaks. We humbly participate in his work in whatever ways he leads us and commands us day by day. And in all of the complexities of our relations with him in our work and worship, we gladly open ourselves to be shaped and formed in our inmost self by the impact and power of his Person, his Spirit. We come to hate what he hates, and to love what he loves. And in this way we increasingly are able to regard life not simply as a matter of command and obedience but to know a joyful sharing in what is clearly the only true life.

So far we have talked about the charismatic character of the Christian life only as a general reality that is true of the whole Christian community. And this is the first thing about Christian spirituality that must be stressed. We are not possessed of the spirit in the first instance as individuals but only because we are members of the Body of Christ where his Spirit dwells and works. Let us recall again Paul's words: "Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit . . . and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink" (I Corinthians 12:12f.). The New English Bible.

The fundamental unity of the church does not lie in the centralization and concentration of spiritual authority and power in the persons and offices of an elite. The church is one because every member is possessed by the same Spirit,

in service to the same Lord and God. Saintliness or spirituality pervades and resides in the whole body, and as Paul repeatedly teaches, if any member of the body is weak and malfunctions, the whole body suffers.

The Different "Gifts"

4. It is important to remember that this basic egalitarianism of the Christian community does not mean identity of function. Here is where most of the holy communities and spiritual movements in the history of Christianity have gone astray. They have been correct in their instinctive rejection of the qualitative division of the church into a spiritual hierarchy on the one hand, and a worldly congregation on the other hand. But they have then mistakenly drawn the conclusion that every Christian has the same spiritual gifts as every other Christian, and therefore every Christian can fulfill any function or need in the life and mission of the church. This is manifestly and pragmatically not the case. Paul also teaches very clearly that this is theologically not the case. The Spirit of God does not ignore individual differences and submerge us all into a homogenized mass. God is indeed One but he creates an infinite variety and gives uniqueness not only to species but to individual members. This is his glory, and this is our honor and dignity.

Therefore, in the life of the church the same Spirit gives a "variety of charismata" or gifts. "In each of us," Paul says, "the Spirit is manifested in one particular way for some useful purpose" (I Corinthians 12:7).[1] Paul is saying that every single member of the church is under the charismatic power of the Holy Spirit so as to serve in some particular way in the life and mission of the church. As is well known, Paul gives three lists of these various gifts and services, and each list is different (Ephesians 4; I Corinthians 12; Romans 12). In these lists two things are particularly important for our present discussion. First, if these three lists are combined, they obviously cover the whole membership of the church. Secondly, right along with such crucial tasks as being an apostle, or prophet, or preacher, or teacher, Paul also lists with equal dignity such modest and unspectacular matters as being a helper or administrator, as contributing money, giving aid, and doing acts of mercy. The abilities to contribute liberally and to be merciful cheerfully are gifts of the Spirit that serve their

[1] *The New English Bible*, Oxford and Cambridge University Press, University Press, 1961

useful and necessary purpose in the life and mission of the church, just as much as the more unusual ones. And no one has all or even many of these gifts. Preachers do not always find it easy to give liberally of their money, even though they preach the gospel of tithing. Nor are teachers and administrators always so good in showing mercy cheerfully. And certainly most Christians do not feel gifted to be an evangelist, or prophet, or administrator.

What is the gift of the Spirit?

5. The diversity and inclusiveness of these spiritual gifts and services now raises another question and takes us to the very heart of this issue with which we began this whole discussion, namely, the question as to whether the church of today is a spiritual vacuum, whether it lacks the presence and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Just what is a charisma, a gift of the Spirit? We have maintained that it is not a possession of a man but is his being possessed by the Spirit. The essence of every charisma is God's gift of himself to a man, in a relationship of loving fellowship (*koinonia*). But we have also stressed that it is precisely as Spirit that God treats men as unique individual persons.

> **When Paul wants to talk about the way this spiritual possession and fellowship is "manifested" in the lives of men, he does not resort to the language of mysticism concerning trances, beatific visions, and loss of self-consciousness in a "cloud of unknowing." Rather, God's gift of his Spirit takes the form and shape of particular and various gifts. In other words, Christian spirituality takes the form of concrete and practical acts of service to one's fellow men.**

In what sense, then, is the capacity to perform such an act of service the "gift" of the Spirit? Here is the heart of our problem. If one studies Paul's three lists of these gifts, and does so in the light of our knowledge of our own involvement in this phenomenon, several things become clear.

For one thing, these specific gifts are not purely supernatural powers that set their human agents apart in the public eye as the workers of "miracles" in the common naturalistic sense of that term. What really makes these men and their acts qualitatively different is not something that can be proved conclusively by empirical demonstration. This is perfectly obvious in the case of preaching and teaching, of exhortation and acts of mercy. But I would argue that it is also the

case with what Paul calls deeds of power, healing, and speaking in tongues. These also are characterized by the same ambiguity and hiddenness of their spirituality. In the whole of Christian history I have yet to hear of a so-called "miracle worker" who walked on water, or of a healer who could restore arms and legs of a baby born without them, or of an ecstatic whose babbling was not open to the suspicion of being a psychological quirk. And it ought to be noted that these more spectacular gifts are not even mentioned in the letters to Ephesus and Rome. Paul apparently deals with them in his letter to the Corinthians because they had gotten out of hand. The whole import of I Corinthians 12-14 is not to encourage the bizarre but to discourage it. He explicitly says they ought to be quite secondary to preaching and teaching. And most important of all is that everything be done with the power of the supreme spiritual gift: love.

Yet, on the other hand, these gifts of the Spirit are not purely natural talents or capacities as developed in the normal course of human existence. We have already admitted that the act of a Christian may not be unequivocally distinguished from the act of a non-Christian. I heard of a group of physicians who had been engaged in a social service project. When it was completed, they were discussing at their last meeting why they had gotten involved. One said, "I guess I was just doing my Christian duty." To which another responded quietly, "I was just doing my Jewish duty." And I can imagine a third saying to himself, "And I my simple human duty." We must thank God that common humanity can sense and respond to human need in natural compassion. Yet if it makes no difference being a Christian, then what did Christ come for? Being Christian does not mean only living in faith and hope; faith that Jesus was the Son of God whose death atoned for our sin; hope that he will come again and deliver us from the grave.

The definitive character of the Christian life is the living *here* and *now* by the power of God's *love* shed abroad in our hearts by his Spirit. In spite of the tragic failures of the church to manifest this love at times, and in spite of the fact that individual Christians often suffer in a comparison with non-Christians, yet the life of Jesus has set loose in human history a challenging and transforming flood of divine love that on the whole and in the long run submits to no comparison with anything else known in the human existence on this globe.

I recently read in a secular journal a secular account of what is being done for the care of the aged sick. Although the church homes at first ignored this problem and left it to commercial interests, the churches are now assuming a responsibility in this field. The author of the article makes this comment, "The real difference between the commercial nursing homes and these non-profit (church) homes is one of atmosphere, motivation, and services, even more than price." I say, it is in such churchly actions as this that the healing hand and ecstatic tongue of the Spirit find their true expression.

What then is the relation between the natural talents and capacities of men and the empowering of the Holy Spirit? It is the meeting and combining of these two that create what Paul call "spiritual gifts." What happens is that God encounters men in Jesus Christ. He speaks his Word to them and brings them to repentance and forgiveness of their sinfulness. He reconciles and restores them to their true nature as the children of God and brothers one to another. And in this process two things happen. First, they are set free from the illusory forces of evil that their own sin had set loose in the world. So all of their God-given creaturely capacities are set free from deceit, pride, and lust. But secondly and even more important, they behold in Jesus Christ for the first time the image of what they were created for. For the first time they know what the blind longing and eager expectation of their creaturehood had been striving to find. By the infiltrating power of the personal love of God they are moved ahead toward the proper and ultimately satisfying use of all their natural gifts, of body, mind, and spirit. These gifts, brought to the service of God and fellow man, are now "spiritual." Spiritual in the double sense of being empowered by the Person of God, and also directed toward the fulfillment of the personal life of men.

In a life so empowered and so directed every creaturely thing, every capacity of the human intellect, every product of man's imagination and every human relationship becomes "spiritual." And every method and discipline, that encourages such a "spiritual" understanding and use of all God's creation, becomes a "means of grace," that is, a way that the Spirit of God makes his entrance into the life of this world and transforms it into the kingdom of God.

6. It is self-evident that such an understanding of the spiritual life and of the gifts of the Spirit will serve as the only foundation for the fulfillment of the cosmic dimensions of the church's mission. In

the translation of men's natural creaturely gifts into spiritual gifts, in the adoption of the sons of Adam as the sons of God, we know the "first fruits" of that for which the whole creation groans in expectation and hope. But even more, this understanding of the spiritual reveals that the spiritual life is not antagonistic to the truly creaturely life. It does not mean an escape from the richness and beauty of this world but a fulfillment of it. It means not a negativistic antisecularism but the assertion of a valid secularism that claims all the world for God.

Furthermore this understanding and practice of the spiritual makes it undeniably clear that the mission of the church is to be fulfilled by the whole *laos* or body of the church. The ways in which most spheres of human activity in this cosmos are to be "spiritualized" cannot even be understood, let alone dictated, by the preacher or theological teacher. Only by a mutual sharing of the gifts of all the members of the fellowship of the Spirit can the possibilities of spirituality in all spheres of life be envisioned. And only those who are called to live and act responsibly in certain structures of the cosmos can bring the spiritual power of God's love and truth to bear there in a transforming way.

This position is elaborated in the magazine, *Nexus*, where I wrote that, what the new life in Christ "really means for the Christian's act in every area of life cannot be defined beforehand by the theologian. But the preacher or teacher within the church, equipped with the basic theology of a Christian ethic, must explore and experiment with a group of Christians who are concerned enough to meet regularly to discuss this basic problem in their fulfillment of the mission of the church. Such discussion will not only help to provide them with motivation for Christian acts in their areas of responsibility in the world, but it will also provide the theologians with a realistic basis for defining what 'theological judgment' truly amounts to when applied to human behavior." (*Nexus*, Spring, 1961)

This point simply makes it clearer yet that the forms and methods that the spiritual life are taking in the twentieth century are not the same as those of medieval asceticism or of eighteenth and nineteenth century pietism. The emphasis today is not upon the spirituality of repentance and forgiveness within the walls of the church but upon the spirituality of obedience in all the structures of the world. The emphasis is not on the spirituality of individual sanctification for the life to come but upon the spirituality of corporate living in the here and now. Of course, twentieth century Christians cannot do the one

and leave the other undone. There is no obedience without forgiveness. But we are coming to be convinced today that obedience in the spiritual battles in the humdrum of daily worldly living is not an incidental by product of inward personal sanctity. Rather, the Christian is led into personal sanctity by the Spirit of God in and through his calling to obedience in worldly matters; indeed, *for the sake* and *to the end* of his obedience there so that God's good creation may be called to its fulfillment.

> **We must conclude that Christ has not deserted his church, that this is not a Spirit-less age. Rather, Christ our Lord is moving by his Spirit in a new direction, with a new emphasis in the totality of the Christian life, bringing to birth new forms of his presence and new methods of spiritual maturation. The question is not: Is Christ present in the Spirit? The question is the same today as in the days of Paul, of Augustine, of Gregory, of Francis, of Luther and Calvin, of Wesley, of Kierkegard: namely, the question: How soon and how vigorously will the church follow the new leading of its Lord?**

As Alexander Miller noted in his book, *The Renewal of Man*, this shift away from a piety of anxiety about my own self-salvation is the fulfillment of what the Reformers meant by "justification by faith." (p.75)

In this new piety of what I would call "Christian secularity," there is a spirit of world-affirmation and worldly gusto, a relaxed mood that rejects either extreme optimism or extreme pessimism, a kind of toughness of mind and softness of heart that seem to contradict each other, a philosophy of one-step-at-a-time that derides long range planning and clever manipulation, an attempt at last apparently to take seriously Luther's injunction: "sin boldly, but more boldly yet believe." All this sounds and looks quite shocking to anyone nurtured in the older forms of piety. But I would suggest patience—and curiosity toward this new piety. Behind its rough and tough exterior, I believe, is a deadly serious attempt to accept realistically the impossibility of human perfection in strict conjunction with an affirmation of infinite possibilities of God's power to accomplish goodness in his creation. Here is a simple humility in the face of human limitations and a gladsome acceptance of whatever joy is possible within these limits. Here is real eagerness not to play down in any way the stark tragedy of human sin and yet an insistence that from God's viewpoint

a robust sense of humor is possible in the face of man's buffoonery and absurdity. Here, in spite of an overweening concern for economic security is a readiness to risk all in selfless abandon for the sake of the freedom and dignity of the human soul.

> **In this piety there is no turning away from God but neither is there the futile attempt to turn away from the world that God created and God so loved and came to save and reconcile in Jesus Christ. So "prayer" in this spirituality is a dialogue between God and man that is not so concerned about either God in himself or about man in himself but about their common life together, about the things and problems in God's world. So prayer also isn't just a leaving everything to God, or just a recharging of the human batteries so man can do everything for himself. Rather, prayer is that struggling together, that giving and taking that never permanently settles anything but always leaves room for the initiative and help of the other.**

It is the working out of a way of life and produces results beyond our own capacities, because we leave room for Him and his acts in the invisible interstices of personal, social existence. So we do not retreat from the world to meet God but open ourselves to his Word and Spirit at that spot *in* the world where he came to meet us. So we do not leave God behind when we go "out" into the world because we have come to know that it is his world and that he is waiting there to meet us also, there to command and there to help us to obey. In a Christian secularity the life of prayer embraces, and perhaps finds its most distinctive form in, the struggles of the Christ-formed conscience as the Christian performs the humble duties of his daily life as a calling in which he is to fulfill his call to Christ's discipleship.

Therefore, if we are concerned about the charismata of Christ's Spirit for our day we will do two things: (1) see to it that the church provides more opportunity for the whole membership to explore together the impact of the Word of God on all the concrete problems in every area of human existence, and (2) see to it that the church provides for all a better understanding and practice of prayer.

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